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ABSTRACT

Workplace learning, both formal and informal, is taking on an increasingly important role in the education and training of the workforce. Based on an analysis of recent research on workplace learning in Australia, in an 'ideal' workplace learning situation enterprises would have in place the elements outlined in the following key findings: (1) workplace learning is aimed at increasing innovative capacity in enterprises; (2) organizational culture supports and values training and learning; (3) training and learning are a part of doing business and are included as an integral part of the strategic planning cycle; (4) training and learning in all forms are valued and used according to the appropriate circumstances; (5) training is customized to individuals and to increase work capability; and (6) networks, partnerships, and supply chains are used to facilitate training. Workplace learning arrangements are important for employers in developing innovative capacity in enterprises. The main issues are developing a culture of learning; linking training to business strategy; valuing all forms of training; customizing training to increase skill levels; and importance of networks and partnerships. (A list of 30 references is appended.) (YLB)

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What makes for good workplace learning?

At a glance

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Why is workplace learning important?

Education and training is no longer seen as being solely the realm of educational institutions. Education and training is increasingly viewed in terms of a broader system involving workplaces, educational institutions, individuals and a variety of other government and community organisations.

The increasingly competitive nature of the economy, and demographic, occupational and workplace change, have had a significant impact on the nature of the workplace. These changes have meant that the skill level of employees must be continuously developed. The skill mix required by organisations is changing, with employers demanding generic skills such as communication and problem-solving skills, in addition to technical skills. As such, workplace learning, both formal and informal, is taking on an increasingly important role in the education and training of the workforce (Johnston et al. 2002). Currently, much of the training in the workplace is not accredited; however, the total extent and diversity of workplace learning is vast.

This *Research at a glance* summarises some of the recent research on workplace learning in Australia. Based on our analysis, if workplace learning was working well in Australia, enterprises would have in place the elements outlined in the key findings.

Key findings: The 'ideal' workplace learning situation

- Workplace learning is aimed at increasing innovative capacity in enterprises.
- Organisational culture supports and values training and learning.
- Training and learning are a part of doing business and are included as an integral part of the strategic planning cycle.
- Training and learning in all forms are valued and used according to the appropriate circumstances.
- Training is customised to individuals and to increase work capability.
- Networks, partnerships and supply chains are used to facilitate training.

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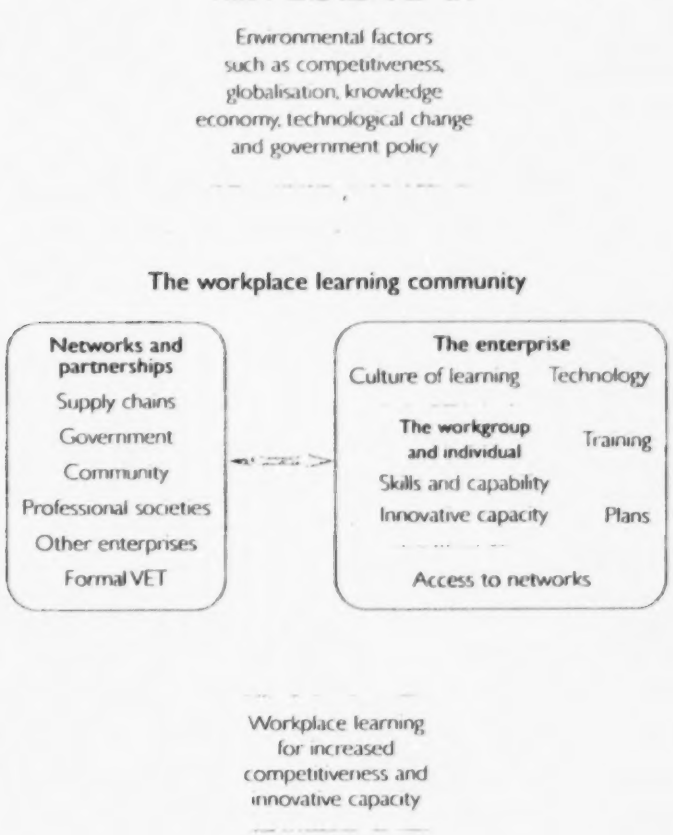
What is workplace learning?

The Australian National Training Authority (ANTA 2002a) defines workplace learning as learning or training undertaken in the workplace, usually on the job, including on-the-job training under normal operational conditions, and on-site training, which is conducted away from the work process (e.g. in a training room).

As can be seen from the key findings, workplace learning should provide the skills leading to the capacity to innovate. Innovation has become a key concept in the ability of firms to be competitive.

In the 'ideal' workplace learning situation, a systemic approach involving networks and partnerships is critical (see figure 1).

Figure 1: A systemic view of workplace learning



The ideal workplace learning situation

Workplace learning is aimed at increasing innovative capacity in enterprises

Effective workplace learning should provide enterprises with the capacity to innovate. Figgis et al. (2001) noted that the advent of the global economy has changed the nature of products and services demanded, as well as the technologies and forms of communication required. This has required changes in enterprises and 'demands more skilled, dynamic and innovative work' (p.11) in order for them to be competitive and to stimulate productivity improvements.

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Factors influencing training in enterprises

Smith and Hayton (1999) found workplace change to be a major driver of training in organisations. In addition, they found that other environmental and moderating factors affect levels of training. Further, they proposed that the way the drivers and moderating factors interact determines what sort of training would take place in the organisation.

Ridoutt et al. (2002) also found that workplace change was a major driver of training in enterprises. However, in contrast to previous research, they found that it was the nature of training, rather than the volume, that varied by enterprise size. In particular they found that smaller enterprises engaged in more informal training than did larger enterprises. As such, their model takes into account both the volume and nature of training in enterprises.

The research overall has identified several factors which influence and drive training in organisations. The major factors are summarised in box 1.

Box 1 Main factors that influence training arrangements in organisations

Factor	Description of factor
Drivers	
Workplace change	Includes a variety of change initiatives including changes in tasks and organisational structure
Quality	A commitment to quality initiatives but could be a part of workplace change
Business plans	Training included as part of the business plan
Industrial relations factors	Whether employees are covered by industrial awards and whether training is included in industrial awards
Moderators	
Enterprise size	Number of employees at a worksite and in the enterprise
Industry effects	Sector of industry
Occupational structure	Proportion of employees who are managers or professionals
Australian ownership	An Australian or multinational enterprise
Workforce structure	Proportions of full-time permanent staff, part-time staff and casual staff

Sources: Smith & Hayton (1999); Ridoutt et al. (2002)

The importance of training to innovation

The Commonwealth has acknowledged the importance of innovation and has released an innovation strategy document called *Backing Australia's ability: An innovation action plan for the future*. It argues that 'success in the 21st Century will depend predominantly on the innovative capacity of nations, their industries and their research and educational structures' (Commonwealth of Australia 2001, p.4), and acknowledges the importance of skills development in this process. The document also stresses the importance of research, science and technology.

There are opportunities for the vocational education and training (VET) system to develop closer links with Australia's innovation system by forming stronger networks with co-operative research centres (Whittingham, Ferrier & Trood 2003). These centres are committed to achieving research outcomes which can be used commercially. Vocational education and training can benefit from closer links to this system by gaining increased awareness of the skill needs of emerging industries. In turn, the centres can benefit from VET's links with industry, and the expertise of VET in designing and delivering courses, to enable the widespread application of innovations.

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While research and development are important drivers of innovation, Cairney (2000) notes that for most enterprises innovation is more about a systematic improvement in performance. Hence, the skill development of employees in many instances is aimed at enabling them to make improvements to existing processes, products and services to contribute to enterprise performance.

Organisational culture supports and values training and learning

Why are workplace cultures important?

Supporting and valuing a culture of learning in the workplace is important because ongoing learning is needed to survive in a time of increasing competition. Additionally, with its aim of skilling and upskilling employees for continued employability, organisations can play a vital role in facilitating lifelong learning by providing an environment conducive to ongoing learning.

The workplace is the key site for the development of generic skills such as communication, problem-solving, teamwork, information technology and customer service skills. These skills are critical in today's workplace, particularly those concerned with employability, and the culture of the workplace needs to assist individuals to effectively develop or use these skills (Virgona et al. forthcoming). For example, to foster problem-solving skills, the organisation must encourage workers to reflect on current practice within the organisation, and to tolerate risks.

There has also been a gradual shift in the VET sector from being a supply- to a demand-driven system. This shift has resulted in a greater focus on stakeholders, with the workplace becoming a major place of learning. The importance of the workplace in supporting training and learning has been highlighted in discussions for the next national VET strategy for the period 2004–2010.

There is, however, a need to change some people's mindsets from seeing workplace learning as a cost, to recognising that it is actually an investment. In this light, the ANTA national marketing strategy has developed approaches aimed at promoting the value of workplace learning (ANTA 2000).

A diversity of cultures and types of learning

As Johnston and Hawke (2002) put it, there is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach to learning cultures. They take a variety of forms and are context dependent. In their study, Johnston and Hawke found that learning cultures were being implemented in different ways. For example, in some of the case study organisations the approach to building a learning culture involved establishing or expanding training opportunities for employees. In other organisations, levels of informal learning were increased through the introduction of enterprise-specific initiatives. One organisation (which already had access to a well-established training system through its parent organisation) was interested in fostering an entrepreneurial approach involving staff taking the initiative and seizing opportunities.

Important features of learning cultures

Although there is a diversity of approaches to implementing learning cultures, there are some common underlying features, which are described in box 2.

Training and learning are a part of doing business and are included as an integral part of the strategic planning cycle

There is much to be gained in aligning human resource development plans with the strategy of an organisation, and business units within the organisation. Organisations need to improve performance to be competitive which, in turn, has implications for skill levels and, consequently, the training needs of employees. This alignment often occurs in high-performance enterprises characterised by change, teamwork and a commitment to training.

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Box 2 Important features of learning cultures

Feature	Explanation
Open communication style	Found to be an essential ingredient in fostering a learning culture. It includes people conversing about and sharing with others what they have learned, and also people developing their communication skills to be able to effectively network with others and contribute to decision-making.
Innovative systems/structures	These include the implementation of training and/or learning assessment systems, organisational restructuring, performance review systems, and the development of documentation and data to support learning.
The role of workplace trainers	Workplace trainers have a complex and broad role in initiating and supporting informal learning, one-on-one learning as well as formal recognised learning through the delivery of national training packages.
The role of informal learning	Informal learning can be deliberately built into organisational systems as a way of enhancing performance. Informal learning is not an ad hoc process; rather, there is an interrelationship between informal learning and work. That is, learning can be incorporated within the work by, for example, providing employees with a variety of tasks, or by arranging the work in a manner which maximises learning opportunities.
Fostering generic skills	The culture of the organisation supports the development of generic skills; for example, communication, problem-solving, teamwork, information technology and customer service skills.
Other features	Other features include an awareness of stakeholders and strategic partners, skills learnt being applied to work at hand, a variety of forms of training and learning being utilised, and people in the organisation being accorded respect.

Sources: Virgona et al. (forthcoming), Figgis et al. (2001), Johnston & Hawke (2002), Harris, Simons & Bone (2000)

Research has found that integrating training with business strategy is a very important driver of training activities in enterprises. For example, in a study of the relationships between management practices and enterprise training, Smith et al. (2002) found that links between strategy and training positively affected a number of training-related variables. These variables included the number of employees receiving training, the level of its external provision, the use of training plans, a focus on behavioural skills training, a greater level of workplace delivery of training, and a greater use of workplace trainers. They concluded in the context of their study of enterprises undergoing organisational change that the link between training and strategy was the most important driver of training.

Schofield (2003) discusses the importance of e-learning, which is learning acquired through a technology-based or electronic media, as a way of integrating learning with the strategy of an organisation. She sees possibilities in e-learning 'leveraging workforce development up the corporate agenda'. In case studies on e-learning initiatives in four Australian companies, Schofield found that three of the companies (Ford, ANZ, Qantas), viewed e-learning as essential in implementing a corporate strategy to deal with the competitive pressures of today's environment. The other company in her case studies, Theiss, was still in the process of developing a new business strategy.

On the basis of these case studies, Schofield sees e-learning as an issue which exists within a broader corporate context. However, to enable this to occur, there needs to be a high performance strategy and, additionally, human resource development staff within the organisation need to embrace this approach.

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Training and learning in all forms are valued and used according to the appropriate circumstances

As already indicated, there is a diversity of training arrangements available in enterprises including formal training (often referred to as structured training), on- and off-the-job training, coaching, mentoring and other forms of informal training. Formal training can be either accredited (such as undertaking a competency-based training package), or non-accredited. These arrangements are described in box 3.

Box 3 The variety of training arrangements

	Formal (structured) training	Informal (unstructured) training
External	Training courses delivered by an external training provider and instructor led either in the classroom, at the workplace or by distance education.	Contact by individuals with other students and teachers in their course, or even contact with family, business or social networks. Examples of this contact include observation, listening, asking questions, reading, listening to the radio or watching television.
Internal	An in-house training course or instructor-led program delivered at the workplace or on the job.	Discussion with other colleagues or observing other colleagues' work, asking questions, being coached, mentored, and self-study.

Source: Dawe (2003)

The extent of training and learning in the workplace

Ridoutt et al. (2002) point out that measuring the level of learning and training activity in the workplace is difficult. Many estimates include only government-funded or formal training, which grossly underestimate the total amount of training taking place in Australia.

Nevertheless, there are some data that seek to cover more than just formal workplace training. The Australian Bureau of Statistics Survey of Education and Training Experience provides data on the percentage of wage and salary earners which undertook external and in-house training (table 1).

Table 1: Wage and salary earners engaged in workplace training 1989–2001 (%)

Type of training	1989	1993	1997	2001
External	9.8	11.8	20.0	20.2
In-house	34.9	31.3	34.2	37.7

Source: ABS Survey of Education and Training Experience (unpublished data)

Further data are available from the *Employer Training Expenditure and Practices Survey* (ABS 2003). For the year ending June 2002, 81% of employers provided some form of training. Of these employers, 41% provided structured training and 79% unstructured training.

The level of structured training provided increases with employer size, with 98% of large enterprises (100+ employees), 70% of medium enterprises (20–99), and 39% of small enterprises (fewer than 20) providing structured training. In addition, 20% of small employers did not provide any form of training, while only a very small proportion of medium-size and large enterprises did not provide training.

A variety of external training providers is used for those employers providing structured training. These include private training providers (40%), institutes of technical and further education (TAFE) (36%), equipment suppliers (24%), professional associations (23%), industry associations (15%) and universities (14%).

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Electronic learning arrangements were used by 38% of employers that provided structured training. In terms of enterprise size, 36% of small enterprises, 50% of medium enterprises and 65% of large enterprises that provided structured training used these arrangements.

The importance of informal learning

Another major issue arising from the research relates to the importance of informal learning. Informal learning has been under recognised both in terms of reporting in statistics and its importance as a valid form of workplace learning. The term 'informal learning', however, is somewhat misleading and, according to some commentators (Billett 2001), even pejorative. It is argued that both formal and informal learning are valuable to skill formation, and it is important to find the right balance between them.

In a study of workplace trainers, Harris, Simons and Bone (2000) found informal workplace learning to be of central importance and, furthermore, that there was an inter-relationship between learning and work. That is to say, informal workplace learning is not merely an ad hoc process, but part of a deliberate strategy which takes into account the work which needs to be done and the skills needed to do the work. This may, for example, involve giving employees a variety of tasks, or arranging the work in a manner which maximises learning opportunities.

Informal workplace learning is of particular importance to small businesses. Various studies have found that, contrary to available statistics, there is a considerable amount of training taking place in small businesses, although it tends to be informal. For example, Smith et al. (2002) point out that small businesses are committed to training but lack the internal resources to undertake more formal approaches.

Kearns (2002) points to the fact that small businesses rely to a large extent on informal learning as a way of achieving immediate business needs. He also argues that in the future more attention should be paid to developing formal approaches. Figgis et al. (2001) argue that formal and informal learning should be used together, with informal learning amplifying the value of formal learning.

Training is customised to individuals and to increase work capability

Organisations should aim to provide training that meets the needs and supports the strategy of the business. Traditionally, organisation-wide training programs have been offered. However, these do not necessarily address all the skill needs of individual employees. To do this requires increased customisation of training for individual employees.

The changing nature of training

Smith et al. (2002) note that the nature of training in organisations has altered in light of recent changes to the workplace. Importantly, they found that organisations in their study were undertaking individual-level needs analysis aimed at the development of individuals. There are two reasons for doing this. Firstly, the organisation wishes to obtain value for money from their investment in an individual's training. After all, one of the major aims of training and development is to increase workforce capability and so increase performance and productivity. Secondly, McDonald and Fyfe (2002) note that quality training can also assist with staff retention and in attracting skilled workers.

Accompanying the change towards individualised training has been increased decentralisation of the training function. Smith et al. (2002) found that line managers are increasingly responsible for training their staff. At the same time, there is an increase in the number of workplace trainers, coaches and mentors to assist in this process. While these workplace trainers have an important role to play in the development of individuals in the workplace, Smith et al. argue that much of the training is delivered by staff who are not trained to do so. This raises concerns about the quality of training being delivered. Harris et al. (2000) also raised this concern in terms of workplace trainers delivering training that lies outside the nationally developed competency standards within training packages.

Management skills

Increasing individual skill levels has also been a focus of the Frontline Management Initiative. This initiative was brought about by concerns regarding the level of frontline management skills in Australian enterprises (Industry Task Force on Leadership and Management Skills 1995). It aims to increase organisational effectiveness by assisting managers to increase their generic skills in areas such as people skills, analytical thinking and attitudes to change.

An evaluation of this initiative (Barratt-Pugh & Soutar 2002) has shown that it is producing positive results, although more needs to be made of its benefits. One reported attribute of the initiative was the ability of individual enterprises to adapt and implement the Frontline Management Initiative according to their circumstances.

Networks, partnerships and supply chains are used to facilitate training

A systemic approach to workplace learning

Learning in the workplace is not just something that happens, but is part of a wider system. This system consists of the enterprise and its managers, the individual, the external training provider, and other organisations such as government and community bodies. There is a change in thinking about how these various elements view each other. Rather than being discrete, the various elements form networks and even become partners. Within a systemic approach, it is the networks and partnership arrangements that are of crucial importance (see figure 1).

Supply chains and the use of e-learning

Changes in the nature of work have seen businesses shift from stand-alone enterprises to production networks and supply chains (Buchanan et al. 2001). These supply chains can be seen as a network involving the suppliers for an enterprise, the enterprise and its employees, and its customers. Effective management and integration of these supply chains is an important ingredient to business success as it can, for example, reduce costs. However, supply chains can also be used to facilitate learning in enterprises.

Indeed, for 2001–2002, 24% of businesses that offered structured training used equipment manufacturers as providers (ABS 2003). Conversely, businesses can also benefit from training their suppliers. As small businesses are a major supplier of goods and services to other businesses, they would also benefit from this training. Alternatively, some enterprises are requiring suppliers to demonstrate that staff have undertaken accredited training in relation to the goods and services produced.

E-learning can facilitate integration of supply chains. An example of this is FORDSTAR, which is 'an instructor led satellite based system for training staff employed by Ford dealers' (Schofield 2002, p.8). The training provided to dealerships is designed to link production, sales and service. One of the major benefits of this is that essential feedback loops are created between the links in the chain from design, through to production, and then through to sales and service.

In the context of vocational education and training, Mitchell (2003) argues that online learning brings benefits to the customers of VET and to VET organisations. VET customers can benefit by greater customisation and even personalisation of online services. In turn, VET organisations improve their customer relationship management. These findings can also be applied to other types of service organisations.

E-learning in general can be seen as a valuable tool in networking. Apart from the important role it has to play in integrating supply chains, it can also assist in the sharing of information. The internet can be used as a forum for people to exchange ideas, discuss work and share what they have learnt. E-learning has become a major tool for training and learning in Australia and internationally. For example, e-learning is part of the 'e-Europe initiative' aimed at creating competitive human resources in Europe (see www.trainingvillage.gr/etv/Projects_Networks/Elearning/).

Community and whole-of-government approaches

Engagement by enterprises with the community can bring potential benefits to the enterprise, individuals and the community. Selby Smith et al. (2002) provide examples of successful engagements.

The Alcoa site at Kwinana in Western Australia has been strengthening its links with the community by its provision of a strong apprenticeship and traineeship program, and by undertaking activities with local TAFE colleges and with schools.

Salty-Seas in Tasmania is an oyster processing enterprise that emerged out of a training program developed by the Tasmanian Fishery Industry Training Council, customised to the needs of the local shellfish industry. The training program has improved the knowledge of the VET system locally, and has resulted in improved training in the local fishing industry. It has also assisted in reducing youth unemployment in the area.

Small businesses have the potential to benefit considerably from whole-of-government approaches to training. Small business agencies, professional associations (such as the Australian Society of CPAs [Certified Practising Accountants]), industry associations, the Australian Tax Office and others currently offer advice and training opportunities for small business in addition to their other services. However, at present these services are not integrated or linked to the formal VET system. Such linkages could potentially improve the service these agencies provide to small business. ANTA is currently funding trial approaches aimed at integrating these business support agencies (ANTA 2002b).

Implications for enterprise cultures

Reaching out to form partnerships or networks also has implications for the cultures of enterprises. In particular, in discussions of elements of effective learning cultures, Johnston and Hawke (2002) imply that an open communication climate is required to facilitate the development of learning partnerships and networks. Similarly, Bateman and Clayton (2002) found that open communication was essential to forming successful partnerships. Enterprises with closed communication styles will not have the skills to be able to reach out and effectively develop these partnerships and networks.

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Using the formal VET system as a partner in facilitating workplace learning

Various providers are used by enterprises, including TAFE and private providers. Vocational education and training has a role to play in the accreditation of training, and in providing training customised to the needs of the enterprise. VET can also service individuals who are in non-standard working arrangements.

Accreditation of training—While much of the training in enterprises is informal, accredited training can provide benefits to both the enterprises and individuals within them. Enterprises may wish to have training accredited for various reasons such as regulation and licensing requirements, or to have training legitimised or valued. For individuals, accredited training is important for continued employability.

Having training formally accredited provides the employee with a nationally recognised and transferable qualification. This accreditation can take place through assessment using processes such as recognition of prior learning or recognition of current competency, together with the use of top-up training where some new skills are required.

Vocational education and training and industry can also come together in partnership in the area of assessment. Known as auspicing, this involves an enterprise and a registered training organisation entering into a partnership so that the organisation can have their training and assessment recognised under the National Training Framework. Bateman and Clayton (2002) found that enterprises are interested in entering into such arrangements, because they want to focus on their core business, and thus do not wish to become a registered training organisation.

Training packages and customised training—Training packages, which are aimed at providing learners with the knowledge and skills required to perform at the workplace, have been part of a push towards increasing levels of accredited training in industry. An example of where this has occurred is through the New Apprenticeships scheme, which has significantly expanded into industry and occupational areas beyond the 'traditional' trades. Training packages can also be customised to meet the needs of specific enterprises. Indeed, several training packages are geared around the needs of specific enterprises. However, training organisations such as TAFE also have the ability to provide short, sharp courses aimed at the specific needs of enterprises.

Generic skills training is also increasingly being provided in training packages. However, while these skills are applicable across industry, they are contextual. Therefore, it is important that training for these skills is customised to the particular industry environment (Hawke forthcoming).

Individuals in non-standard working arrangements—In today's labour market many workers—such as casual or part-time employees, and contractors—are not tied to a particular place of employment, but are rather in non-standard working arrangements. These people may not be able to access the standard workplace learning arrangements. This, in turn, has implications for the VET system.

Owen and Bound (2001), in case studies of contractor alliances, provided insights as to how the VET sector can better service people involved in non-standard working arrangements. An important way in which vocational education and training can assist is by providing better opportunities for group networking. One of the ways contractors learn is through seeking information from others and by talking about their learning experiences with them. In addition, this networking provides an opportunity for them to gain new work. Vocational education and training can also assist contractors by providing short, sharp courses specific to their needs. Use of the internet is one method through which VET can provide opportunities for interaction to contractors.

A forthcoming report by Callan and Ashworth discusses in detail features of partnerships between vocational education and training, and industry.

Summary

Workplace learning arrangements are important for employers in developing innovative capacity in enterprises. The main issues are:

Developing a culture of learning—The ability to develop innovative capacity depends not only on the skills of the workforce, but on the internal environment of the enterprise and hence the culture of the workplace. While there is a diversity of ways these cultures can be implemented, an open communication style is an important feature of learning cultures.

Training linked to business strategy—There is much to be gained in aligning training and strategic planning in organisations wishing to improve performance. This alignment is a major driver of training in organisations. The training is aimed at improving the skills of employees and their ability to contribute to enterprise performance. E-learning is an important way of integrating learning with strategy.

Valuing all forms of training—There is a variety of training arrangements in enterprises and these should all be valued, taking into account the circumstances surrounding the enterprise. This includes informal learning, which plays an important role in learning in enterprises, particularly in small enterprises.

Customising training to increase skill levels—Training should be customised to the level of individual employees and to increase the skill levels of managers. The Karpin report (Industry Task Force on Leadership and Management Skills 1995) amongst other things noted the importance of creating managerial climates valuing innovation and diversity. The Frontline Management Initiative was developed to provide managers with the requisite skills to enable them to develop a culture of innovation.

Importance of networks and partnerships—Networks and partnerships are seen as being particularly important in the innovation process. An example of this is networking and learning from suppliers and customers on issues which can result in improvements to processes and products and services. E-learning is valuable in developing these networks. Engagement by enterprises with the community has also been shown to bring benefits to enterprises, communities and individuals.

The formal VET sector has the ability to provide training customised to the needs of the enterprises. Vocational education and training can also accredit training undertaken through auspicing arrangements and recognition of prior learning arrangements. For people who are not permanent employees, VET can provide opportunities for group networking.

In addition to the above issues, enterprises increasingly see generic skills as being important in developing innovative capacity and so increasing competitiveness. To be innovative requires flexibility in the way work is undertaken so skills such as problem-solving, communication, information technology skills, team building and adaptation to change are seen as being particularly important (Cairney 2000).

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The VOCED international research database contains considerable information about workplace learning at http://www.voced.edu.au

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